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References

Kluth, A. (2008). The perils of sharing. *Economist*, 28. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.

Section: Leaders**The perils of sharing****The surprising threat to your privacy is closer than you think, cautions Andreas Kluth**

Something new has recently occurred in the timeless human activity of socialising, and it will begin to cause a lot of grief in 2009. The fashionable term for it is "sharing". In its new context, this refers to volunteering personal information that used to be considered off-limits to all but the most intimate friends and relatives — but that is now taking on a life of its own.

It may consist of daily photos to chronicle a pregnancy, uploaded to websites such as Flickr or Facebook and adorned by comments from "friends", real and imagined. Or video clips of bacchanalia by the hockey team. Or geo-tagged and time-dated clips of the girls' Softball team's weekly practice, with each girl's name tagged and pointing to a MySpace page.

But things can go wrong in pregnancies, and prying eyes that are not those of friends suddenly witness tragedies or a cruel hiatus in updates. College-admissions deans and potential employers browse bacchanalian footage. Perverts can plot detailed schedules of a particular girl's movements on a given practice day.

People have always tried to manage their reputation, and today's new media give them powerful tools to do just that. So most people participate, and share, enthusiastically. This is rational, says Edward Felten, a privacy expert at Princeton University, because they get benefits: inclusion into a community and more control in crafting and presenting their own image.

The problem is that they quickly lose that control. This has to do with what Steven Rambam, a professional investigator, modestly calls "Rambam's Law": whatever purpose a piece of information may have been created and shared for, it will eventually be used for something

else. There was a time when the likes of Mr Rambam got paid big bucks to snoop out somebody's picture, sexual history, mother's maiden name (still a popular password) and list of friends. Today, this is a matter of minutes spent stitching together data from a few web sites. An identity thief, a political rival, a bitter ex-spouse, a litigant — anybody who is savvy and wants information — can get it.

Most of the paranoia about privacy in the internet era has focused on the power of companies, primarily Google, to collect information about all our doings online. Google installs cookies in web browsers that record the search history of users; it analyses the text in e-mails to insert relevant advertisements; it takes photos of private homes — occasionally with the residents visible — and adds them to its online maps.

This makes it necessary for the public to scrutinise Google and similar companies, and to hold them accountable for any breaches of privacy. But Sergey Brin, one of Google's two founders, is also right to point to the risk of an asymmetrical hysteria. The public may have overreacted to the perceived threat of Google. Google ensures that computers, rather than humans, "read" user data. And Google has a powerful incentive to protect its users' information, rather as the self-interest of banks includes proper custody of depositors' data.

The enemy within

Meanwhile, the public has mostly ignored the bigger danger: ourselves. Anybody with a mobile phone that is also a camera is today a potential producer of an autobiographical documentary. She may upload this for fame, friendship and fun, but it may come back to hurt her.

Does that mean that it is prudent to opt out of Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube and their ilk? Probably not. Participation has become automatic. Even as the camera phone makes each individual an autobiographer, it also makes all the people around her into freelance paparazzi, with their own tabloid-style press (the web). Those paparazzi capture, tag and gossip about her in their own photos, clips and "twitters".

So there we are, a Google search away, for all to see in places and company we should not have been in, the unwitting backdrop of other people's documentaries.

The only remaining choice is whether or not to inject our own perspective, with our own media, into this never-ending stream of narratives, to preserve whatever control remains in presenting our own image. The wise will still share things about themselves in 2009. But they will become hyper-sensitive about sharing collateral information about others, in the hope that reciprocity and a new etiquette will eventually limit everybody's vulnerability, including their own.

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By Andreas Kluth

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